Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

Your People, My People: An Exploration of Ethnicity in Ruth

Neil Glover

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

⑤SAGE

Additional services and information for *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jot.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jot.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://jot.sagepub.com/content/33/3/293.refs.html

Your People, My People:
An Exploration of Ethnicity in Ruth

NEIL GLOVER

103 Overton Road, Cambuslang, Glasgow G72 7XA

Abstract

This article reviews competing theories of ethnic identity to suggest different points in the book of Ruth at which Ruth the Moabite may become an Israelite. Close reading of the text favours the suggestion that Ruth enters the Israelite *ethnie* upon her acceptance by the Bethlehem community in ch. 4. This accords with a Constructivist vision of ethnic identity, where biological descent is not always necessary for ethnic belonging. Though the ethnic vision of Ruth is often supposed to contrast with that in Ezra–Nehemiah, the nuances of ethnological theory suggest a greater congruence between these two texts. The conclusion identifies some advantages and dangers of employing anthropological theory in biblical studies.

Keywords: Ruth, ethnicity, Ezra–Nehemiah, anthropology, ethnology, Constructivism, Primordialism.

For all the apparent tranquillity of its town councils and barley harvests, the book of Ruth is a curiously restless place. There is little that stays the same. Emptiness is transformed into fullness, childlessness into

fecundity, calamity into blessing; famine is followed by harvest and the scars of death are met with the unlikeliness of life.[1]

The purpose of this study is to probe at another possible transformation in the book. Within its four chapters, something seems to happen to the ethnicity of Ruth the Moabite. I say 'seems' because this transformation is more mysterious and implicit than any which is mentioned above. Yet for all its elusiveness, I will argue that much of the energy of the narrative lies behind this quiet yet essential transformation.

Furthermore, a proper consideration of Ruth's ethnic transformation allows a more nuanced comparison with the constructions of ethnicity in Ezra–Nehemiah, a text with which Ruth is frequently compared. This comparison is carried out in the second part of this study.

1. The Hidden Transformation

Ruth's ethnic transformation is mysterious because at the last the text abandons its obsession with Ruth's ethnicity. Ruth is introduced as a Moabite[2] (Ruth 1.4) and on six subsequent occasions (1.22; 2.2, 6, 21; 4.5, 10) we are reminded that she is 'Ruth the Moabite'. However, in the text's final reference, Ruth is given no ethnic identifier. She is no longer 'Ruth the Moabite', neither is she 'Ruth the Israelite'; rather she is simply 'Ruth'. How are we to read this solitary, undesignated 'Ruth'? Is this a narrative oversight (the previously pedantic text has forgotten to tell us Ruth's ethnicity) or the deliberate erasure of an awkward piece of data (a Moabite is now involved in the building up of Judah)? Has Ruth entered an undefined, liminal state where she is neither Moabite nor Israelite (ethnically stripped and floating freely above the constraints of ethnic designation)? Or has Ruth indeed undergone that rarest of phenomena—full-blooded ethnic conversion?[3]

---

1. For emptiness to fullness, see Ruth 1.21 and 2.18; childlessness to fecundity, see 1.11 and 4.17; calamity to blessing, see 1.21 and 4.14; famine to food, see 1.1 and 2.17; and death to life, see 1.3, 5 and 4.15. Linafelt (1999: xviii-xix) also argues (convincingly) the importance of the constitutional transformation from Judges and Kings and thus Ruth's importance as an 'interlude between Judges and Samuel'.

2. Here I will follow the NRSV in translating מוֹאֲבִיָּה as 'Moabite' as opposed to the more accurately gendered but clumsier 'Moabitess'.

3. Gil-White (1999: 808-13) argues that despite the claims of Barth, there are no true examples of ethnic conversion. Unfortunately, Gil-White's careful discussion of Barth does not deal with Barth's example of the Yao who assimilate 10% of their population every generation. The case of the Yao is particularly pertinent to Ruth since the similarities are remarkable. Assimilation into the Yao involves 'obligations to ancestors,

    Any answer to the above will depend on how the ethnic significance
of the following events is understood:

Ruth	Description
1.16	Ruth pledges allegiance to Naomi with the words 'Your people will be my people'
1.22	Ruth and Naomi live together in Bethlehem
2.11	Ruth's leaving of her home and sheltering under the wings of Yhwh is recognized by Boaz
4.11	Ruth's coming into the house of Boaz is witnessed by the assembly of the people
4.17	Ruth's son enters the genealogy of Israel

There are at least three possible modes of interpretation:
1. Unilateral Situationalists[4] may suggest that Ruth becomes an Israelite upon her pledge of allegiance to Naomi. Ruth becomes an Israelite at Ruth 1.16.
2. Sympathetic Constructivists[5] may argue the welcome Ruth receives from the Bethlehem assembly meets the necessary criteria for ethnic membership. Ruth becomes an Israelite at Ruth 4.11.
3. Hard Primordialists[6] will resist any of the above: ethnicity is immutable; neither speeches of allegiance nor community welcomes can do anything to erase the Moabite gene. Ruth never becomes an Israelite.

compensation by payment, etc., and secondly, the incentive of obvious advantages to the assimilating household and leader'.

4. Using Fenton's definition of a situational ethnicity (Fenton 2003: 84) that 'the actual identity deployed or made relevant changes according to the social situations of the individual'. The anthropological literature shows little consistency in the range and definition of terms used for different conceptions of ethnicity (see an alternative typology in Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 8-9). The actual labels used here are unimportant. I have simply sought conceptions of ethnicity which provide different answers to the question 'When does Ruth become an Israelite?'

5. Barth describes his own views as 'constructivist' (Barth 1994: 11). Barth's emphasis on defining an ethnic group as having a membership 'which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order' (Barth 1969: 10), emphasizes 'ascription and self-ascription' (Barth 1994: 12). Ethnic actors themselves 'construct' the ethnic boundary. I use the label 'optimistic' since this interpretation demands that we understand Ruth's entry into the 'house of Boaz' as also implying entry into the Israelite *ethnie*.

6. Using the terminology of Gil-White (1999: 798): a 'Hard Primordialist' defines ethnicity by biological descent alone, regardless of circumstance.

2. Unilateral Situationalist

Though I have listed three interpretations, only the second and third will be fully considered in this study. The 'Unilateral Situationalist' reading (at least as I have defined it) can neither be supported by the ethnological literature, nor by the text of Ruth.

A 'Unilateral Situationalist' reading assumes that individuals can change their own ethnicity without the recognition of other actors.[7] Gil-White persuasively argues that this is impossible. After surveying many instances of ethnic boundary crossing (both actual and alleged), he writes 'one cannot simply "grab" a new ethnic label and begin interfacing with another ethnic community as a full member' (Gil-White 1999: 812).

Deprived of any theoretical backing by the anthropologists, the 'Unilateral Situationalist' will discover an equivalent dearth of support in the text. Ruth's 'your people/my people' speech of Ruth 1.16 may constitute an impassioned lunge at Israelite ethnicity, but without an Israelite response it remains isolated and meaningless. Naomi answers with silence (1.17) and the narrator responds by calling her 'Ruth the Moabite' immediately she enters Bethlehem. Indeed, Ruth herself seems to acquire doubts when she later refers to herself as a foreigner (2.10).

Thus the rudiments of ethnological theory and the details of the text prevent any serious consideration of the 'Unilateral Situationalist' interpretation of Ruth's ethnicity. Unfortunately, this has not prevented commentators adopting this reading. Coxon writes that Ruth's speech 'thoroughly Judaizes her' (Coxon 1989: 26), while Rashkow observes that 'By one simple statement of God's name Ruth joins Naomi, her people and her religion' (Rashkow 1993: 32). The alarming naivety of such remarks surely illustrates the need for exegetes to acquire a small amount of anthropological savvy before pronouncing on ethnic and cultural data.

With the demise of the 'Unilateral Situationalists', only the 'Sympathetic Constructivists' and the 'Hard Primordialists' now remain. Which of these offers the superior reading of the text? In judging this, we shall not be judging whether ethnicity in general is best understood as a Constructivist/Circumstantialist or Primordial phenomenon. Rather, we

---

7. Even the most non-biological descriptions of ethnicity (see, e.g., the purely Circumstantialist description of ethnicity in Cornell 1996: 266) involve the consent of more than one actor.

are attempting to deduce which of these viewpoints is held by the actors within the text.[8]

3. The Hard Primordialists

Finding Hard Primordialists in Bethlehem is a surprisingly difficult task. To suggest that the Hard Primordialist party holds a Bethlehemite majority would also require that:

1. Ruth enters the house of an Israelite (Ruth 4.11-12) without becoming an Israelite herself. Ruth enters the בית but not the עם. Though the בית frequently exists as a subdivision of the עם (see, e.g., Num. 1.20-43) this would not be the case in Ruth.

2. That Ruth ceased to be called 'Ruth the Moabite' through amnesia or embarrassment.[9] Amnesia is difficult to believe of a text which is so aware of the echoes of other texts and of the balancing structures between its first and final chapters.[10] Embarrassment is difficult to believe of a text which has so carefully reminded us that Ruth is a Moabite, well after her initial entry into Bethlehem. If Ruth's Moabite origins are an embarrassment, why wait until ch. 4 to blush? Why not quietly drop any mention of Moab shortly after ch. 1?

3. The renowned 'where you go/I will go' pledge was only partially fulfilled. Five of its clauses (the go, lodge, God, death and burial clauses) would be fulfilled but the third (the people clause) would remain unrealized. To believe that Bethlehem was inhabited by an assembly of stubborn Primordialists is to believe that Ruth 1.16-17 is an unfulfilable oath, over-optimistic in its hopes for ethnic transfer.

There are probably only two reasons to suggest that the Bethlehem assembly was stocked with a Primordialist majority:

---

8. This is one of the implications of Barth's emphasis on the role of actors in determining ethnicity. It is the actors themselves who determine how ethnicity must be understood in a given context. See Gil-White 1999: 799-800.

9. Another, more remote, possibility is that 'Ruth the Moabite' is used to distinguish Ruth from other Ruths in the village. However, if this were the reason, the 'Ruth the Moabite' label would still have been necessary after marriage, or at least changed to something equally distinctive, such as, 'Ruth the husband of Boaz'.

10. For an overview of the book's structure, including the balance between first and fourth chapters, see Linafelt 1999: xxi.

1. Ethnic actors tend to be Primordialist; it is only ethnologists who are more likely to be (knowingly) Constructivist. Since it is unlikely that the citizenry of Bethlehem contained any such ethnologists, it is best to presume the dominance of Primordialism.
2. The genealogy at the end of Ruth (Ruth 4.18-22) represents eventual victory for the 'Hard Primordialist'.

3.1. Ethnic Actors Tend to be Primordialist

It may indeed be true that the majority of ethnic actors are Primordialist.[11] However, this does not imply that they are incapable of change when confronted with a persuasive incomer such as Ruth. Even if the majority of ethnic actors are Primordialists, they are open to exceptions. As Fishman has written:

> The biological component of ethnicity is just as pliable, escapable, interpretable and compromisable as the non-biological bases of human aggregation. Each folk theory, whether within or outside an ethnic cluster has escape hatches and allows for transformation. (Fishman 1980: 86-87)

As I shall note later when discussing the names given to Ruth throughout the text, the book of Ruth is not about the non-existence of Primordiality, but rather its erosion. Boaz, then Naomi and finally the town assembly come to accept the possibility of Ruth's ethnic movement. The actors in Ruth may arrive in the text with Primordialist views, but Ruth the Moabite prompts them to open one of Fishman's ethnic 'escape hatches'.

3.2. The Closing Genealogy

No passage in the book seems to have caused as much pain to commentators as these closing verses.[12] However, this is perhaps ascribing too much power to these verses. Genealogies are curiously limited half-

---

11.   This is Gil-White's (1999: 790) key argument. It is noticeable, however, that his paper does not deal with communities who have assimilated through marriage a sympathetic incomer, as happens in Ruth, nor does it deal with the marriage of an outsider into a community, but rather the birth of children. Gil-White's surveys also show that a significant minority (41%; see Gil-White 1999: 798) do not always adopt a Hard Primordialist viewpoint.

12.   See Fewell and Gunn 1989: 53 and many others. There is indeed something to lament here (Linafelt 1999: 61), but the erasure of Ruth's name need not imply the triumph of ethnic immutability.

documents,[13] their interpretation vulnerable to the surrounding text. Is the genealogy a moment of Primordialist posturing?[14] Or is it a satirical move, with the dull mechanics of the primordial genealogy being exposed by their juxtaposition alongside the literary *élan* of what has gone before?

Here I suggest that any Primordialist reading of the genealogy is considerably weakened by the preceding text. This may be answered by considering the great connecting verb between the genealogy and the rest of the text: ילד ('to bear').

The genealogy (or תולדות) is constructed from ten instances of ילד,[15] ten instances whose interpretation is vulnerable to the previous uses of ילד in the book. There are eight instances of the verb (and its sub-stantives) in the book:

Ruth	Translation
1.5	The woman (Naomi) was left from her two sons (ילדיה) and her husband.
1.12	Even if I had a husband tonight and bore (ילדתי) sons.
2.11	You left your father and mother and your native land (מולדתך).
4.12	May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore (ילדה) to Judah.
4.13	Yhwh allowed her [Ruth] to conceive and she bore (תלד) a son.
4.15	Your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him (ילדתו).
4.16	Naomi took the child (ילד).
4.17	A son is born (ילד) to Naomi.

Only three (Ruth 4.13, 15, 16) of these instances of ילד could be viewed as wholly positive by a 'Hard Primordialist'. In the other instances, the cases of ילד are transitory (1.5), inadequate (1.12), non-binding (2.11), non-Israelite (4.12) and non-biological (4.17). If ילד was ever conceived as the bedrock of superordinate,[16] biologically defined, permanent identity,[17] then these associations have been deeply problematized prior to the closing genealogy. The text of Ruth prevents its closing verses

13. For the flexibility of genealogical interpretation, see the discussion in Crüsemann 1996: 58-71.

14. Akin to Boaz's posturing at the assembly, see Fischer 1999: 48.

15. That is, one occurrence of תולדות ('descendants') and nine instances of הוליד ('to cause to bear, to beget').

16. In the sense of an identity which over-rides all others; see Banks 1996: 13.

17. ילד may have these connotations in a Primordialist reading of the closing geneal-ogy. Banks (1996: 13) picks up on this aspect of Primordialism, describing it as a perma-nent and essential condition.

being read as a Primordial Manifesto; rather, the text demands that we hunt for the story behind the genealogy. Its succession of instances of ילד is a thoroughly incomplete telling of history.

In summary, there is little evidence that many 'Hard Primordialists' remain in Bethlehem by the end of the book of Ruth. We now examine the slightly stronger suggestion that 'Optimistic Constructivists' were in the majority.

4. Optimistic Constructivists

In hunting out Bethlehem's 'Optimistic Constructivists' we must pay attention to: the use of names in the book of Ruth; the manipulation of stereotypes; the place of the house.

4.1. The Use of Names in the Book of Ruth

Ruth is a book about seed, fields, and houses; the deep connections that hold them together and the human aspirations they symbolize. Such themes have inspired the insights of countless commentators. However, few commentators seem to have noted the importance of another primary object in the text: the name. Chapter 1 ends with Naomi's discussion of her name. The field/wife acquisition assembly of ch. 4 is a discourse on names: how a name (Elimelech) might be preserved (Ruth 4.5, 10) and the hope that another (Boaz) might be celebrated (4.11). Following the birth of Obed, the women of the neighbourhood hope for the calling out of his name (4.14).

It is not just in the outbursts of chapter 4 that names become important. They are used with great care throughout the narrative: submerged or elevated according to context. Boaz (prominent, valiant Boaz) is the great 'named one' of the text.[18] He is named 17 times in the 44 verses in which he appears. However, this masks the disappearance of Boaz's name at the threshing floor; cloaked by the dark ambiguities of the scene, Boaz is reduced to 'the man' (3.3, 8, 16, 18). Apart from this scene, Boaz is named 16 times in 29 verses. In daylight, Boaz is named more frequently than any other character in the book.[19]

18.   The over-naming of Boaz also heightens the contrast between Boaz and the potential redeemer. This man is unnamed in the nine verses in which he appears. The use of פלני אלמני in 4.1 is a particularly pointed refusal to name this character.

19.   The closest is Naomi who is a named more often than Boaz (19 times) but over more verses (39). She is the implied, unnamed, subject of more verbs (17) than Boaz (in daylight scenes, he is the unnamed subject in only seven verbs).

If Boaz's name is muted by the darkness of the threshing floor, Ruth's becomes silenced and qualified by the city of Bethlehem. Once in Bethlehem she is named only nine times in 56 verses.[20] Only twice is she known simply as 'Ruth'.[21]

When in Bethlehem, Ruth is named as follows:

Ruth	Name	Used By	Context
1.22	Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law	Narrator	Arrival in Bethlehem
2.2	Ruth the Moabite	Narrator	Conversation with Naomi at home
2.8	Ruth	Narrator	Conversation with Boaz at field
2.21	Ruth the Moabite	Narrator	Conversation with Naomi at home
2.22	Ruth her daughter-in-law	Narrator	Conversation with Naomi at home
3.9	Ruth your handmaid	Ruth	Ruth approaches Boaz at threshing floor
4.5	Ruth the Moabite	Boaz	Boaz addresses the assembly
4.10	Ruth the Moabite	Boaz	Boaz addresses the assembly
4.13	Ruth	Narrator	Boaz marries (literally 'takes') Ruth

If we leave aside Ruth's 'Ruth your handmaid' speech at the threshing floor (3.9),[22] there remains a series of 'Ruth the Moabite' and 'Ruth' designations. There are two points to be made here. First, these designations seem to represent different viewpoints within the book.[23] For example, the first use of 'Ruth the Moabite' (1.22) represents the view of the Bethlehem residents: 'a foreigner has arrived'.[24] Secondly, something

20. Prior to her arrival in Bethlehem, Ruth is named three times in ten verses. On each occasion she is simply known as 'Ruth'.

21. The contrast between Ruth and Boaz is further highlighted if we consider that (outside of ch. 3) Boaz is the unnamed subject of seven verbs (in ch. 3 he is the unnamed subject of twelve verbs). Ruth, by contrast, is the unnamed subject of 46 verbs. The low number of occasions on which Ruth is named cannot be because she is not doing anything throughout the text. Neither can the reason be that the text is clear, without any need to name Ruth explicitly. Verses are often ambiguous (Ruth 2.18 being the most obvious example) because proper names are not used. By contrast, Boaz's name is repeated (e.g. 4.1-2) more often than the demands of clarity require.

22. This is different in that it represents (like the pledge of Ruth 1.16-17) Ruth's aspiration rather than recognition within the community. It belongs to the שפחה, נצריה, אמה promotion dynamic described by Berlin (1983: 88-89).

23. See Berlin 1983: 59-61 on the narrative technique of using names to express different viewpoints. The narrator does not always adopt a global, omniscient viewpoint; but may describe from a more localized perspective.

24. A viewpoint expressed by the foreman (Ruth 2.6) who tersely refers to Ruth as 'the Moabite', and one to which Ruth is undoubtedly sensitive when she calls herself a 'foreigner' (2.10).

significant must have occurred whenever the narrative can bring itself to use Ruth's name. The narrative is too carefully constructed[25] and Ruth's name too heavily censored for the rare appearances of that name to bear no significance.

I propose that Ruth's name is used without the Moabite tag whenever her re-situation within Israel has been recognized. The first of these moments occurs with Boaz (2.8): the man who recognizes that she has left her father, mother, birthplace, and is now re-situated under the wings of Yhwh (2.12—characteristically Boaz goes for the grand flourish).

The second recognition is offered by Naomi in Ruth 2.22. Previously an *ephah* of barley had not been enough (at least in the eyes of Naomi) to subdue Ruth's ethnic awkwardness. She had remained 'Ruth the Moabite' (2.21). Only when her mother-in-law recognizes that she has an invitation to join Boaz's harvesters[26] can reference to Ruth's Moabite origins be abandoned. Naomi has at last responded to the pledge of 1.16-17. Since Ruth is now situated in the field of Boaz, she is now 'Ruth her daughter-in-law' (2.22).[27]

The final recognition is offered by the entire assembly (4.13). Boaz has twice referred to 'Ruth the Moabite' (4.5, 10), possibly a gesture towards the viewpoint of the assembly.[28] After the marriage takes place the assembly can celebrate Ruth's re-situation within the house of Boaz (4.12-13) and by reference to Rachel and Leah, within the house of Israel. At last, they too refer to her as 'Ruth'.

Thus the naming of Ruth represents her threefold re-situation: first, in the eyes of Boaz, then Naomi, and finally the entire assembly of the people. These actors have recognized that something has happened to Ruth, she has been socially re-situated. It is not that Ruth remains a Moabite despite this no longer being mentioned; rather, her ethnic status has actually changed. The removal of the 'Moabite' designation indicates that Ruth has entered the Israelite *ethnie*. As such, she will be named as

25. Linafelt (1999: xiii-xv) is a fine *hommage* to the artfulness of the narrative.

26. Ruth 2.10 perhaps implies that this was an unusual invitation for a foreigner.

27. Field (שדה) being a key word in Ruth, and picked up on by Naomi (Ruth 1.22).

28. For a convincing reading of Boaz's posturing at the Town Assembly, see Fewell and Gunn 1989: 50-53. However, I find Boaz's adoption of 'Ruth the Moabite' a rhetorical device, temporarily adopting the publicly held view of Ruth, and waiting for the people themselves to call her 'Ruth'. Fewell and Gunn's reading (that Boaz is entering a risky inter-ethnic marriage for the sake of the dead, and thus increasing the perception of his own virtue) does not fit with the naming schema for Ruth throughout the rest of the book.

all other members of the *ethnie*: Boaz is not named 'Boaz the Israelite', he is simply 'Boaz'; 'Naomi' is not called 'Naomi the Israelite', she is Naomi. Likewise Ruth is not to be called 'Ruth the Israelite', she is simply 'Ruth'.

4.2. The Manipulation of Stereotypes

We can point to several factors in Ruth's enthusiastic acceptance among the Bethlehem community. Some are directly alluded to in the story—she shows kindness (1.8; 3.10), she is industrious (2.7), she makes an old man very happy (4.10),[29] she provides Naomi with a son (4.15), and Israel with a king (4.17). These qualities are noticed by a number of influential figures—namely, Boaz and the women of Bethlehem.[30]

It is doubtful whether these acts of goodness are sufficient to engineer Ruth's ethnic transition: Boaz can tell Ruth that she is acknowledged as a woman of virtue (3.11) before his people,[31] yet before these same people she remains 'Ruth the Moabite' (4.5,10). To effect her ethnic transfer Ruth must engage in activities which are more culturally loaded than mere kindness or industry. She must counter Moabite stereotypes and align herself with the heroes and heroines of the Israelite tradition.

The Torah's hostility to Moabites rests on three stories: the Moabites' refusal to give Israel bread during the Exodus (Deut. 23.3-4); their recruitment of the sorcerer Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22.1-7); and Moab's conception when a drunken Lot is seduced by his daughters (Gen. 19.30-38). These stories give rise to three stereotypes: Moabites are ungenerous, idolatrous (Num. 25.1-3), and incestuous (Bailey 1995: 131). Each of these stereotypes is confronted by Ruth. How can she be ungenerous when she provides Naomi with bread[32] (an event which

29.   Fewell and Gunn (1989: 47) point out that the implication of 'you have not gone after the younger men' is 'you have gone after me!' They also make a convincing case that Boaz sees Ruth in sexual terms, as an object of desire.

30.   The importance of informal, female networks in shaping the village life of ancient Israel is discussed in Meyers 1999. Ruth's clinging to the women harvesters (Ruth 2.22) would have gained her acceptance from this socially powerful group.

31.   Note that Boaz calls them 'my people', not 'our people'—Ruth is still an outsider. I am also assuming that Boaz's speech is believable at this point, and that Boaz is not merely attempting to charm Ruth with ungrounded flattery. Ruth 4.15 supports Boaz's claim that Ruth's virtue is understood throughout the community, meaning that Boaz's charm does not necessarily imply total fabrication.

32.   Fischer (1999: 35-37) also suggests that the author of Ruth is suggesting a sophisticated form of Torah exegesis, specifically that the condition (Moabites did not

represents a narrative turning point—we move from emptiness to fullness and Naomi stops being miserable)?[33] How can she be idolatrous when she pledges allegiance to Naomi's God (Ruth 1.15; 2.12)?

The third stereotype, that Moabites are incestuous, is confounded with great subtlety. When Naomi first discusses Boaz (Ruth 2.20) she gives two items of information—he is a relative (קרוב) and he is a redeemer (גאלנו). However, when Naomi is briefing Ruth, prior to the 'foot' uncovering at the threshing floor, she only reminds Ruth that he is a relative (מדעתנו, 3.2).[34] Why Naomi's emphasis on Boaz's status as a relative, and not that of a redeemer? I suggest she has remembered Ruth's ancestors, the daughters of Lot. She wants Ruth to employ a peculiarly Moabite talent—the seduction of drunken elder relatives. For Ruth, as for the daughters of Lot, this will ensure her security.[35]

Despite Naomi's coaching, Ruth departs from her mother-in-law's script (Rashkow 1993: 39-40)—she does not call the startled Boaz a relative but a redeemer (3.9). In doing so, she rejects one precedent (that of Lot's daughter's) and claims another (Tamar who tricked Judah into restoring to her what was rightfully hers).[36] Ruth has rejected a Moabite stereotype and aligned herself with an Israelite heroine.[37] She is not an 'incestuous bastard'.

---

offer bread) of Deut. 23 does not apply, and therefore neither does the instruction (Moabites should be excluded from the assembly). Indeed, the book of Ruth functions as one large tract against the stereotype that Moabites do not give bread (see Ruth 1.1; 2.18; 3.17; 4.12—assuming a congruence between זרע and לחם).

33.   In Ruth 2.20-23, Naomi acknowledges the kindness of God (cf. 1.21) and begins to envision the future. Fewell and Gunn (1988: 102) suggest Naomi's continued self-interest until the end of the story, as Ruth is disregarded by the announcement 'A son is born to Naomi' (4.17). While I agree that this ending is problematic, 2.18 still represents a significant upturn in Naomi's mood: she is no longer the passive victim of calamity (1.21), but rather the active instigator of cunning plots (3.1).

34.   Note that in Ruth 3.1 Naomi calls Ruth 'daughter', which serves to make her relationship with Boaz closer than if she had merely been a daughter-in-law (as in 3.22).

35.   Compare Ruth 3.1 and Gen. 19.32.

36.   LaCocque (1990: 94-96, 101-102) argues that the introduction of redemption into this scene is an appropriation of the story of Tamar. He defines a redeemer as 'one who restores an object to its primal condition'. The primal condition, for Ruth and Tamar, is that of marriage. Fewell and Gunn (1989: 50-51), also vexed by the term גאל, concur that redemption in this context is about marriage

37.   Something not lost on the women of Jerusalem when they connect her with Tamar (Ruth 4.12).

Ruth is aligned with other Israelite figures throughout the narrative: in leaving mother, father, and kindred she becomes like Abraham and Rebecca;[38] her covert introduction into the bed of an unsuspecting man binds her with Leah;[39] her stealthy approach towards a sleeping male places her in the company of Jael.[40]

By her connections with Tamar, Abraham, Rebecca, Leah, and Jael Ruth is situated within the Israelite tradition. At the same time, her associations with bread, Yhwh, and redemption unburden her of the cultural baggage bequeathed by those incestuous daughters of Lot.

4.3. The Idea of the House

Ruth is a text which is dense with household relationships: seven times we are told that Ruth is Naomi's daughter-in-law; ten times we are told that Naomi is Ruth's mother-in-law. It is these constantly repeated, non-biological relationships which hold the book together.

It is concern for the house (in particular that of the dead man Eli-melech) which is prominent in the town council discussions of Ruth 4. The bonds of the house, not those of biology, allow the women to call Obed the son of Naomi (4.17) and acclaim 'your daughter-in-law is better than seven sons' (4.15).

This focus on the house (with its pragmatic exceptions), rather than the *ethnie* (with its tendency toward generalized ideals) strengthens the Situationalist vision of ethnicity in the book of Ruth.

We now move to Ezra–Nehemiah, a text where Ruth's prioritizing of household over nation will be reversed.

5. Ezra and Nehemiah

Nobody, it seems, much likes Ezra–Nehemiah,[41] which is frequently considered the ethnocentric hate-piece of the Old Testament/Tanakh.[42]

---

38. Fischer 1999: 43; cf. Gen. 12.1 and 24.4-8, 58.

39. Fewell and Gunn 1988: 106; cf. Gen. 29.23-25. Note also the explicit comparison in Ruth 4.11.

40. Here בלט (Ruth 3.4) / בלאט (Judg. 4.21) functions as the connective. See Linafelt 1999: 51-52.

41. Here I will treat the ideology of Ezra and Nehemiah as similar, although Smith-Christopher (1996: 121-27) notes differences between the two books, while arguing that Ezra is a protest against marriage between post-exilic and non-exilic Jews, Nehemiah is a protest against Jewish marriage to non-Jews.

This hostility is largely misplaced. It is misplaced because ethnic survival depends on boundary maintenance; and it is misplaced because Ezra–Nehemiah has not been read with sufficient ethnological care.

Ezra–Nehemiah is a book which erects high ethnological walls: non-Israelites are not permitted to assist the construction of the temple (Ezra 4.1-3), foreign[43] wives are sent away, and there is a continued emphasis on separation from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6.21; 9.1; 10.8-11; Neh. 9.2; 10.28; 13.3). Nevertheless, these policies are not born out of prejudice or paranoia. They are born of necessity. No *ethnie* can survive if it fails to police its ethnic boundary; and ethnic boundaries are policed[44] through attention to kinship,[45] commensality,[46] and religious cult[47]— precisely the areas of life dealt with by Ezra and Nehemiah. As Nash has written:

> If these boundary mechanisms [kinship, commensality and cult] were breached with regularity the group as a differentiated entity would also cease to exist (Nash 1989: 11).

Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms may sound ethnocentric to contemporary ears, but to criticize them is to criticize Ezra and Nehemiah for having the temerity to preserve the Israelite *ethnie*,[48] for not allowing it to lie down quietly and die.

42.   Note the citations in Smith-Christopher 1996: 123, as well as LaCocque's references (1990: 110, 113) to the Jerusalem hierocrats and conservatives. Even with commentators broadly sympathetic towards these books, reservations remain about the perceived ethnocentrism of the text. Typical is Williamson's lament that the marriage ending of Ezra is 'among the least attractive parts of Ezra–Nehemiah, if not the whole Old Testament' (Williamson 1985: 159).

43.   See Smith-Christopher (1996: 122-27) for the different definitions of 'foreigner' that may be operating in these books.

44.   See Nash 1989: 10-11.

45.   Note the genealogies in Ezra 2.1-70; 8.1-20; Neh. 7.6-73 (which is nearly identical to the genealogy in Ezra 2); 11.3–12.26.

46.   As will be noted later, there is less of an emphasis on commensality, although the general emphasis on separation must surely have had implications for eating with those considered foreign.

47.   The role of the House of God is particularly emphasized in Ezra, where it is referred to on 25 occasions.

48.   Note that the text emphasizes the theological dimension to this survival (Yhwh will punish if the *ethnie* is allowed to be compromised—Neh. 9.6-37; 13.26-27) as well as a certain amount of anthropological realism (Neh 13.23-25). See Smith-Christopher 1996: 123 (n. 14) for a discussion of Nehemiah's reforms as legitimate defence against threatened ethnicity.

In the exegetical hysteria which surrounds Ezra–Nehemiah's boundary building there is a failure to read the text. It is too easily forgotten that these books are about gates as well as walls.[49] Through these gates pass members of other *ethnies* to trade (Ezra 3.7 and Neh. 3.16) and to take up their invitations to eat with Nehemiah (Neh. 5.17).[50] In the language of Barth, there remains a significant 'sector of articulation' (Barth 1969: 16) between Israel and other *ethnies*.

Ezra–Nehemiah is not the racist enclave that many suggest. To dismiss Ezra–Nehemiah as either 'exclusionary' (Smith-Christopher 1996: 118) or 'conservative' (LaCocque 1990: 113) demonstrates a lack of anthropological nuance and sensitivity to the text.[51]

Another label which has been attached to Ezra–Nehemiah is 'primordial',[52] and this deserves more serious investigation. The many genealogies, the rhetoric of 'common flesh' and 'holy seed' do indeed place a strong emphasis on the 'ineffable bond' of shared descent.[53] The ethnic boundary in Ezra–Nehemiah does seem to be defined in overwhelmingly 'primordial' terms, but there remain a small number of 'Contructivist' gaps in the masonry:

First, when the exiles return from Babylon a number are unable to prove their Israelite descent (Ezra 2.59-63 and Neh. 7.61-65). The only sanction applied to these returnees is that priests are excluded from the most holy food until the Urim and Thummim are consulted. Thus, being unable to prove descent had no effect on a person's ethnic participation unless he was a priest. Even then, the difference may only have been temporary.[54]

---

49.   In Nehemiah it is the gates which are built first (Neh. 3). Nehemiah seems keen to talk about gates rather than the wall to outsiders. Compare the two speeches in Neh. 1.3 and 2.3. It is worth noting that in Ruth the cultural transaction occurs at the gate (Ruth 4.1).

50.   See n. 44 for the importance of commensality in ethnic boundary construction. The significance of eating at Nehemiah's dinner table should not be underestimated.

51.   Sparks (1998) is an exception to this tendency. He argues for a congruence in the ethnic vision of Ezra–Nehemiah and Second Isaiah in a similar way to how I argue for congruence between Ezra–Nehemiah and Ruth.

52.   Brett (1996: 13) refers to 'Ezra/Nehemiah's "primordial" nativism'.

53.   See the reference to primordial bonds in Geertz 1973: 259-60.

54.   We never hear the final verdict in this question. Regardless of the present reading, this condition only applied to priests—non-Levites were able to function as normal.

Second, the first Passover is kept by returned exiles and by all those who had separated themselves from the 'pollutions of the land' (Ezra 6.21). There is nothing to demand that this latter group were of Israelite descent.[55]

Third, those who have 'separated themselves from the peoples of the lands' (Neh. 10.28) pledge to follow the Torah. Once again, there is no demand that these individuals are of Israelite descent.[56]

Fourth, the term עֶרֶב in Neh. 13.3 may be translated as 'descent' (as, e.g., in the NRSV). It need not, however, demand 'physical descent'.[57] Alternatively, this verse could be translated 'And when the people heard the Torah they separated all foreign nations from Israel'.

Fifth, the citation of Moses' example (Neh. 13.1-3) as reason for separation from foreigners is revealing. Moses married a woman who was born a Midianite,[58] an *ethnie* perceived in a way very similar to the Moabites.[59] If this verse were interpreted with a purely ethnobiological understanding of ethnicity, then Moses himself would have had his beard pulled of by an enraged Nehemiah.

Thus, the ethnic positions of Ruth and Nehemiah are not diametrically opposed to one other. In Ruth a Moabite pledges herself to Israel and through various cultural transitions becomes an Israelite. The women that Nehemiah expels have not made any Ruth-like 'Your people/My People' pledges. Rather, they are Moabite women who remain culturally Moabite.[60] These two texts do not demand different visions of ethnicity: an 'Optimistic Constructivist' could have both welcomed Ruth and applauded Nehemiah.

It is a common move to contrast the ethnicity of Ezra–Nehemiah with Ruth, even to suggest that Ruth was written as a polemic against the

---

55.   Sparks (1998: 295) notes that this passage makes room for the 'willing outsider'. It is not clear whether this passage refers to those of unproven Israelite descent or of known non-Israelite descent. The ambiguity may be deliberate.

56.   There might be a sense of this in the אֲחֵיהֶם of Neh. 10.29 (10.30 in *BHS*), but there is no demand that אֲחֵיהֶם is a purely biological term.

57.   Unlike זרע, which clearly does have these connotations (see Ezra 2.59; 9.2; Neh. 7.61; 9.2, 8).

58.   Although note that the text never refers to Zipporah but only to her father as a 'Midianite' (Exod. 2.21; 4.25).

59.   Note that both Midianites and Moabites recruit Balaam (Num. 22.4-7; cf. Neh. 13.2) and that both Midianites and Moabites 'lead astray' Israelite menfolk at Peor (Num. 25.1-18, in which episode the terms 'Midianite' and 'Moabite' seem to be conflated).

60.   The women of Neh. 13.23-25 are very different to Ruth.

reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.[61] Such a comparison is only possible if we employ labels such as 'inclusivist' and 'exclusivist' to analyze the text. However, more nuanced ethnological frameworks prevent such a crude opposition and suggest a degree of congruence. If Ruth had crept into the threshing floor and found herself at the feet of Nehemiah, her story may still have had the same ending.

Despite these similarities, there remain differences between Ruth and Ezra–Nehemiah.

First, there is a difference between what lies on the surface of the narrative and what is present but submerged. The book of Ruth is a story about the welcome of a Moabite, but strong hints of inter-ethnic conflict lurk beneath the text; they are alluded to without being named.[62] By contrast, Ezra–Nehemiah's hostility to non-Israelite opponents would fail to evade even the most insensitive of readers; however, the text is still littered with Constructivist escape hatches.[63]

Secondly, there is a difference in dynamic between the two texts. By the end of Ruth's story most ethnic actors seem to become 'Constructivist'. In Nehemiah, the majority ethnic position remains 'Primordialist', although the text preserves a number of 'Constructivist' loopholes. Both texts hold out the possibility of ethnic transformation: in Ruth it is realized; in Ezra–Nehemiah it is never dismissed.

Finally, the book of Ruth is a story about Bethlehem and the house of Perez; Ezra–Nehemiah is a story about Israel and the house of God.[64] In Ruth the needs of the house are placed before the larger concerns of the *ethnie* (or the עם);[65] in Ezra–Nehemiah the needs of the *ethnie*[66] over-ride

---

61. See LaCocque 1990: 91, 113-14 for a particularly trenchant defence of this position. See Smith-Christopher 1996: 118 for the tendency of exegetes to posit that any 'non-primordial' text (e.g. Ruth, Jonah, Third Isaiah) is 'directed against the attitudes reflected by Ezra and Nehemiah'.

62. See the previous discussion of anti-Moabite stereotypes in Ruth.

63. To borrow Fishman's phrase (1980: 87).

64. Bethlehem and the house of Perez do feature in Ezra–Nehemiah, but only as a small part in a larger story. Residents of Bethlehem contribute 123 of the 42,360 returnees (Ezra 2.21); the House of Perez contribute 468 valiant (חיל—the adjective used of Boaz and Ruth in Ruth 2.1; 3.11; 4.11) warriors to live in Jerusalem.

65. Thus Boaz can call 'Ruth the Moabite' at the same point as agreeing to marry her.

66. This is not to say the house is unimportant, but it is important for the sake of the *ethnie*. If the needs of the house differ from the needs of the *ethnie*, then it is the house which must be relegated: note, for example, the divorces of Ezra 9 and Neh. 13 and the building sequence in Nehemiah (Neh. 7.14—the Jerusalem wall was built before individual houses).

those of the house. If there is a difference between the ethnic vision of Ruth and Ezra–Nehemiah it does not lie in their criteria for membership of בית and עם, but instead in how they adjudicate between the sometimes conflicting interests of these two entities.

6. Conclusions

6.1. The Role of Anthropology

Anthropology adds to our reading of the text by adding nuance. Barth, Fishman, Gil-White *et al.* prevent us reducing the ethnological perspectives of the text to such crude binaries as exclusivist vs. inclusivist.[67] They undermine weak readings (the 'Unilateral Situationalists') and offer new ones (the 'Optimistic Constructivist' reading).[68] Furthermore, the subtleties of ethnological theory shed light on the subtleties of the text: for example, in the company of Barth it is easier to understand why Ruth is still being referred to as the 'Moabite' in chs. 3 and 4 of the narrative.

Furthermore, anthropology adds to our reading by bringing us closer to the Yao, the Pathans, the Baluchi and the Kazakhs. When European and American commentators adopt their 'good Ruth vs. bad Nehemiah' readings, to what extent are they being influenced by the frightening history of Western ethnocentrism: European anti-Semitism, the American Civil Rights movement, and the 'ethnic cleansing' in the Balkans? It is entirely proper that these cultural memories inform our interpretation, but they must not be the only memories allowed to do so.[69] The contexts foregrounded by Cultural Anthropology may bear an even closer resemblance to those of Ruth and Nehemiah than the inter-ethnic conflicts of post-industrial Western society.

In suggesting how biblical studies might be enriched by anthropology, a note of warning must be added. Good biblical studies, like anthropology, is about careful observation; this must not be forgotten when

---

67.   Smith-Christopher (1996: 119) has a typology of Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion.

68.   I have yet to encounter this reading in any commentary or article on Ruth.

69.   Donaldson (1999) and Maldonado (1995) are examples of commentators who are explicit about the cultural experience which has informed their reading (American Indian and Mexican/Hungarian/American respectively). Both of these interpreters are suspicious (Maldonado less so than Donaldson) of Ruth's assimilation since inter-ethnic marriage has often been used to weaken an *ethnie*. This is not to say that all examples of ethnic boundary crossing are as culturally aggressive as those chosen by Donaldson and Maldonado.

attempting to negotiate the many voices of anthropological theory. A number of the offerings in *Ethnicity and the Bible*[70] are weakened not because the anthropology is poor, but because the authors have been so distracted by the 'Introduction to Anthropology' dictionary that they have forgotten to read the text. Anthropology will only fulfil its potential in biblical studies if we remember to keep doing the old things well.

6.2. The Ethnicity of Israel

Ruth is not a contentious polemic, written to refute some imagined primordial dominance in the Hebrew Bible. It is not some Constructivist oasis amidst a barren desert of Primordialism.[71] As I have noted, even Ezra–Nehemiah (the supposed heartland of ethnobiological, separatist ethnicity) displays some Constructivist tendencies. Within the Tanakh, Ruth is not such an alien text and has more friends than is often supposed. The book's allusions to Tamar, Rachel, and Leah are not the conscription of reluctant witnesses, nor are they the revisiting of embarrassing moments when someone forgot the ethnobiological script. Rather, they are blatant, celebrated reminders that in Israel, genetics do not always dictate the cultural boundary.

   Ruth is the celebration of something important that happens in Israel: seed leaves the sheaf (Ruth 2.16) and it is returned (4.12).[72] There are hints of this throughout the Old Testament/Tanakh, even in Ezra–Nehemiah. However, nowhere more than in Ruth does it become the topic of so much public conversation.

---

70.   The articles by Smith-Christopher (1996) and Dyck (1996) are the two articles related to the Old Testament/Tanakh articles that give closest attention to anthropological theory. They both, however, miss critical data in Ezra–Nehemiah. Neither has a sufficient discussion of the 'constructivist loopholes' which have been discussed in the present study.

71.   Smith-Christopher is typical of many who adjudge the book of Ruth to be a Constructivist exception in the Canon. He cites the book among his 'moments of insight' in the Old Testament/Tanakh and describes Ruth and other 'inclusivist' texts (such as the latter parts of Isaiah and Bel and Susanna) as 'fine moments of profound hope that ancient Hebrew writers are capable of' (Smith-Christopher 1996: 141).

72.   These ideas are linked to ethnicity through Boaz's speech concerning Ruth's ethnic transfer—'you have left (עזב) your father and mother and your native land' (Ruth 2.11)—and his instructions concerning the harvesters: 'pull out for her some handfuls from the sheaves and leave (עזב) them for her to glean' (2.16).

References

Bailey, R.C.
    1995   'They're Nothing but Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives', in F.F. Segovia and M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place*. I. *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press): 121-38.

Banks, M.
    1996   *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London: Routledge).

Barth, F.
    1994   'Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity', in H. Vermeulen and C. Govers (eds.), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis): 11-32.

Barth, F. (ed.)
    1969   *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (London: Allen & Unwin).

Berlin, A.
    1983   *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series, 9; Sheffield: Almond Press).

Brenner, A. (ed.)
    1999   *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).

Brett, M.G. (ed.)
    1996   *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill).

Cornell, S.
    1996   'The Variable Ties that Bind: Content and Circumstance in Ethnic Processes', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19: 265-89.

Coxon, P.W.
    1989   'Was Naomi a Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn', *JSOT* 45: 25-37.

Crüsemann, F.
    1996   'Human Solidarity and Ethnic Identity: Israel's Self-definition in the Genealogical System of Genesis', in Brett 1996: 57-87.

Donaldson, L.E.
    1999   'The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes', in Brenner 1999: 130-44.

Dyck, J.E.
    1996   'The Ideology of Identity in Chronicles', in Brett (ed.) 1996: 89-116.

Fenton, S.
    2003   *Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Fewell, D.N., and D.M. Gunn
    1988   '"A Son is Born to Naomi!" Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth', *JSOT* 40: 99-108.
    1989   'Boaz, Pillar of Society: Measures of Worth in the Book of Ruth', *JSOT* 45: 45-59.

Fischer, I.
    1999   'The Book of Ruth: A "Feminist" Commentary to the Torah?', in Brenner 1999: 24-49.

Fishman, J.
    1980   'Social Theory and Ethnography', in P. Sugar (ed.), *Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Eastern Europe* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio): 84-97.

Geertz, C.
    1973   *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books).

Gil-White, F.
    1999   'How Thick is Blood? The Plot Thickens…: If Ethnic Actors are Primordial-ists, what Remains of the Circumstantialist/Primordialist Controversy?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22.5: 789-820.

Hutchinson, J., and A.D. Smith (eds.)
    1996   *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

LaCocque, A.
    1990   *The Feminine Unconventional—Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press).

Linafelt, T.
    1999   'Ruth', in T. Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth, Esther* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press).

Maldonado, R.D.
    1995   'Reading Malinche Reading Ruth: Toward a Hermeneutics of Betrayal', *Semeia* 72: 91-109.

Meyers, C.
    1999   '"Women of the Neighbourhood" (Ruth 4.17): Informal Female Networks in Ancient Israel', in Brenner 1999: 110-27.

Nash, M.
    1989   *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Rashkow, I.
    1993   'Ruth: The Discourse of Power and the Power of Discourse', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press): 26-41.

Smith-Christopher, D.L.
    1996   'Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the "Foreigner" in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology', in Brett 1996: 117-42.

Sparks, K.L.
    1998   *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel—Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns).

Williamson, H.G.M.
    1985   *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC, 16; Waco, TX: Word Books).